**Assimilation**

*The following is an autobiographical account of the Peace Corps experience of Carrie-Ann Tkaczyk, who served from 1990 to 1992 in Nepal. Tkaczyk worked on environmental and educational projects in the Himalayan country. The narrative was contributed to the Peace Corps Digital Library, an online collection of Peace Corps–related materials.*

Assimilation. The Peace Corps trained, versed, and talked to our volunteer group ad nauseum on the subject. So much so that during my first month in a village on top of an Annapurna foothill, it was a piece of cake to find my exact place on the downward trajectory of culture shock. Homesickness—check. Anxiety—check. What I hadn't expected was that no matter how clearly I defined my symptoms, checking them off could not fortify my heart.   I had been plunged into a world of isolation and silence.

At night I huddled against my host family's smoky fire, wiping irritated eyes with a bandana as I listened to the undulating rhythm of a language I had been given no score sheet to read. The Peace Corps had trained us to speak Nepali, but not Gurung, the language spoken in people's homes.

During the day I sat on the cliffs above my school and traced the sky in the place I imagined the Annapurnas. I was told that it was a stunning view, one that trekkers sometimes took a detour off the trail to see. It was lost to me; my hill was obscured in a mist that grew like a grey moss, waving back and forth in the wind but sticking stubbornly to the rocks.

Even the village, nearly empty since most everyone was planting the rice fields below, seemed to be in stage two of culture shock—withdrawal. The only time I saw more than a few people at a time was when I ducked behind my house and undid the burlap bags around the pit latrine. Suddenly hoards of children surrounded my little hole hoping to catch a glimpse of my very white behind. Nothing I said could budge them so I held my bladder until night and snuck my toilet time in the dark. I slid on my share of cow waste that way, but at least I had some privacy.

As for my teaching assignment, only one child showed up. The others were in the fields and would be for who knew how long. Even the teachers stayed away, working their own land far below the mist. No one could tell me when school actually started, so I would trek an hour to work each day only to sit alone in the teachers' office reading my books. I felt like a jellyfish floating without a skeleton.

Right after finishing *War and Peace* in three days, I ran. I wrote a goodbye note to my friends in the nearby villages, and without even telling my headsir, I started the long hike down to the nearest phone. After only a month, I was going to early terminate, and I didn't care. I wanted action, movement, a current to pick up my body and shake it into solid form. About halfway down the hill, as I neared the rice fields, it began to rain the fat drops of tropical lands, and the ever-present moss of mist thickened until I couldn't see where I was going. But I was racing, skittering, mud-up-to-my-knees, happy. I was going home. I had made a decision, shrugged off the lethargy of the last month. I felt alive.

Then something stopped me. A noise from somewhere below. I paused beneath the shelter of a banana tree so that I could identify the sound over the clattering rain. Soon I recognized the high-pitched, achingly innocent voices of children singing as they worked in the rice fields. As raindrops ran like mercury down banana leaves, I listened. I had never heard anything like it. I'm not sure how long I stood there beneath that banana tree breathing in the wonder of those voices singing in a language I was just beginning to understand. The tones washed against me as their songs carried on to the beat of the rain. I stopped trying to decipher the words, was too absorbed to think as the children sang, one song, two, three. I was jolted back only when a water buffalo broke through the mist and jerked up its head in surprise. I smiled at it, as if we two were accomplices in this experience. Its eyes rolled back in its head and it raced off. I laughed.  Just like that, Nepal touched my heart.  I turned around, and headed back up. The inertia of that first month lifted. My family began to speak Nepali with me, I learned a few words of Gurung, the children and teachers returned to the school, and one day even the stubborn mist peeled off the rocks to reveal peaks that stretched like sails skimming across a vast sea of sky.

**Carrie-Ann Tkaczyk**